

SLEEK

Art & Photography

On Persistence of Vision at Gropius Bau

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Peter Hujar, David Wojnarowicz (Hand Touching Eye), 1981

Lately, I've been seeing quite a bit of nostalgia photography – images from the 70s, 80s and 90s, often showing younger versions of people who would become influential creative figures in their own right, many of whom we still celebrate today or build on their legacies. I don't intend to negate that heritage, which is no doubt worth preserving, but I do wonder if it is at a threshold of relevance. I don't have an answer – I hardly do – but that's not the point.

Maybe it is rather about a re-looking at the medium of photography itself, and how we look at it now. Photography has never had it easy in the art world. Once celebrated as a great invention, then doubted for its significance as art, later highly commercialised, and through its ubiquity almost made obsolete – not the medium itself, but the intrinsic meaning it once carried. The democratisation of photography sounded phantasmic, and access to the metaphorical 'everyone' is wonderful – but what happened to it, to the magic it presented us, the anchor to the past, the memento mori, the proof of life?



Peter Hujar, Will: Shar-Pei (I), 1985



Peter Hujar, Hudson River (III), 1976

Here I am at another retrospective photography exhibition, this time at Gropius Bau in Berlin, which has just opened *Peter Hujar / Liz Deschenes: Persistence of Vision* – and I got smacked in the face in the sweetest way. It felt, unexpectedly, like an answer.

We've been speaking about the need for more kindness for quite some time now. *Persistence of Vision* is a glimpse into what I imagine must have been two gentle eyes looking at the world. Hujar's (1934 – 1987) queer lens is what makes these images so different. Many of the images in the exhibition are from the 1970s and 80s New York City, a time that would of course affect a whole generation, between stigma, death and the beginnings of a more liberated sexuality – something society, even now, still struggles with. But it is more than that – it is the care, the philosophy, and the love that lingers in these images. He is said to take time with his sitters, to establish a relationship, and I find that all his subjects feel treated in the same way – be it a person, a dog, a tree, a cow, or even just a blanket. It's so *beautiful* in its complex, complicated, and simple idea of the word – like when you are truly seen.



Peter Hujar, Self-Portrait (I) Jumping, 1974



Peter Hujar, Beauregard and his Dog Pilar (I), 1983

If Hujar's work is about being seen, Liz Deschenes' (1966) installations seem to ask how we see. Her works appear like pauses within the grid-image presentation on the walls of the institution. Although the mainly square formatted black and white photographs are not overwhelming because of their quantity, but, as we have trained our eyes to scan through floods of images every day, Deschenes' works remind us to slow down and look more closely. They feel like material annotations to the medium – not in a hierarchical sense, but as a kind of de-tour. Her objects largely reflect, obscure, and seem to shift as one moves in front of them, searching for a focal point that continually withdraws.

In Hujar's portrait photography the focal point is piercingly soft, it feels like conversations with kindness. He has not received the attention many of his peers have over the years, and only recently has his body of work come to be more widely appreciated. Many are now asking why that might be the case – what are we seeing now that was not recognised then? And it seems to me that although photography is everywhere and constant, we still don't quite know how to see. The act of looking refuses to be manualised, much like Deschenes' malleable surfaces.

I am not sure if the artists' works in fact converse. The impetus seems to lie somewhere between presence and absence, between the trace of the artist and the viewer's position within the space – whether that constitutes a shared spatial agency or not remains open. Thus the dilemma of photography – always anchored in a time and place by the nature of its technology, yet not guaranteed to be understood in that same moment. Perhaps this is why we return so often to the past, to nostalgia, in order to recognise what we could not see when it was present. Sometimes, we only grasp the importance of an image when we can no longer encounter it in the contemporary moment.



Peter Hujar, Foley Square, New York, 1976



Peter Hujar, Candy Darling on Her Deathbed, 1973